

Saturday, June 23, 12

On Saturday night, October 27, McNamara, driving back to the Pentagon from the White House, looked at a beautiful sunset and thought that he and all others might never see another Saturday night.

How would that be? He must have thought they were on a course that might lead to all-out nuclear war within a week. If Khrushchev rejected the last proposal, offering a no-invasion pledge and a private trade, he must have expected the attack and the pre-invasion bombing of Cuba to begin on Tuesday—or earlier, if our low-flying recon planes were hit the next morning.¹

He did not know that JFK and Rusk, just after the small group meeting (and just before JFK went back to dinner with Powers and Mimi Alford, while RFK was with Dobrynin) had agreed to have the Rusk-Cordier-U Thant initiative ready for the next day, accepting a public trade, K's latest offer.

So: how could he—given the stakes as he saw them, serious as they were both for JFK and for his leadership in NATO and NATO's cohesion—have accepted passively the prospect of the end of civilization, the annihilation of a quarter of the earth's population? (Apparently he was thinking of DC being hit: even the US was "going to get its hair mussed," as Gen. Buck Turgidson put it).

How could he have been making final preparations for invasion—knowing the missiles were operational (even though he did not know of the tac nucs, or the 42,000 Soviet troops) *without saying to the president, or even considering it so far as we know, "This can't go further; there must be no attack."*

Everything done that far could be justified as a bluff, a threat not to be carried out, like K's strong assertion that the blockade would not be complied with. Yes, JFK had "acted" as if the "gravest issues" had been raised; he had taken an elaborate act of war, the blockade, not knowing that K's ships would not run the blockade and lead our Navy to sink a ship or submarine. (Rusk, for one, was happy to find that the president's speech itself had not led to a Soviet attack!) He had gambled the world once already. But now, he apparently expected, we were not just going to disable a

¹. (Did he and the rest of the "small group" Saturday evening know that RFK would be making an ultimatum? The JCS were recommending the attack and invasion by Tuesday in any case. There seemed to be an assumption that that would take place. Did Dillon, Nitze, McCone and the other hawks (Bundy?) who claimed not to worry about the outcome—K must back down—expect this to happen or not? Did they (did I?) expect a backdown by Monday?)

ship's rudder (or accidentally sink it) but to attack a large number of Soviet troops manning SAMs, and then attack Soviet combat units.

How could he—and every other non-insane member of the ExComm—have failed to say to the president, either privately or in the group—“We’ve gone as far as we can go. It looked Friday night as if we could get the missile out without making any concessions other than a no-invasion pledge. [The JCS would have regarded *that* as an unforgiveable defeat, if it were meant to be observed. Oddly, no one in the ExComm seemed to be reluctant to make that pledge; most of them did not know about Mongoose or the invasion planning earlier.]

“But *you were right Saturday morning*; the public trade not only looks fair to the world, it is fair, and much better than running the risks of carrying out our threats, if K turns down the private trade.” Not one member of the ExComm *had spoken in agreement with the president (!)* all day Saturday; he had been left all alone on this.

He had trusted only Rusk with the awareness that he himself was prepared to go further, to carry out his argument of Saturday morning without their approval. (He hadn’t mentioned to the group the possibility of having U Thant make the same proposal, to which he could defer rather than directly to Khrushchev. Nor did anyone else mention this possibility: including Rusk, in front of the group, even the small group).

Wasn’t this the time for McNamara, and for anyone else who saw the prospects as he did (Ball—who was ready to tell his family to leave town?) to express privately support for Kennedy’s position as of that morning, or something like the Cordier gambit? JFK would then, presumably, have told him that he agreed and had already given Rusk the task of preparing that, Sunday or Monday.² There was no need for the president to keep someone who agreed with that in the dark Saturday night, fearful of a cataclysm within the next week or even the next day.

The point is not that McNamara need not have been so anxious that night, but that it was unconscionable that, given such realistic anxiety, he took no step to spare the world the prospect of annihilation. Like me as a twenty-five year old Marine officer in the Suez crisis, he simply readied himself to carry out whatever (invasion) the president ordered: no matter how much he might disagree with it and however horrific the consequences he expected, for the US and the world: without even suggesting an alternative. (Two years later, he would serve a new president exactly

² (Even waiting that long left open the possibility that a plane would be downed first thing Sunday morning and that at least an attack on AA and SAMs would follow. But that wouldn’t preclude accepting the “U Thant” proposal on Sunday; the opposition to it from the JCS would be even greater (there were expected to be some American deaths from the attack on the AA alone) but so would American and world support for it.)

the same way, not even informing LBJ that he had agreed with JFK a month earlier that the US should under no circumstances commit combat troops to Vietnam).

The same moral critique would apply to the president himself, if he had *not* prepared and contemplated the Cordier initiative. Several times he had observed to Bobby and to O'Donnell and Powell the concern for the children of the world, and the future of humanity. They implied their admiration for his concern: but that didn't lead them to ask, "Then, how far are you prepared to go with this? Will *you* go all the way to nuclear war? Why? Should you be doing this?"

From what Rusk revealed twenty-five years later, his true answer would have been, "That's not going to happen. I won't let it. I'll get out of this without an attack, whatever way I have to." Why didn't he tell them that, without their asking?

Because O'Donnell says that he and Bobby together told him privately that he should *not* make a public trade. (They were like me Saturday night). He was ready to do it without their approval. (As O'Donnell said to me, about JFK having told him he would get out of Vietnam "after the election": "He didn't say that just because he knew I would approve; he didn't need my approval.")

He may have closest to revealing his real attitude to his mistress Mimi Alford, when he told her—minutes after directing Rusk to arrange for the public trade to be facilitated by Cordier—"I'd rather my children be red than dead."

Astonishing statement for a president or any politician to make, to anyone, during the Cold War. The answer, the right answer, to the questions above. Not that there was any question whatever of his children being red, whatever he did. But there was a real possibility that they would be dead, if he did what the ExComm and much of the world expected him to do. He was saying that *anything* would be better than that, not only for his children but for the world: *even losing his office* in 1964, which was quite likely if he directed Rusk to set the public trade in motion the next day.

Saturday, June 16, 12

Berlin & Cuba

Saturday, June 16, 12

Situation:

The US was trying to change the regime of Cuba: by covert actions leading up possible US invasion. The Soviets wanted to avert such an invasion, and if possible end US intervention and pressure on Cuba: i.e. secure the (Communist-run) status quo in Cuba.

K was trying to change the status of West Berlin—by threatening to allow the East Germans to block access—but more generally, to secure the (Communist-run) status of East Germany and East Europe—safe from the threat of NATO intervention in support of uprisings there or opposition to repressions by the Soviet army—by maintaining the status quo of a divided Germany, accepted by both superpowers, with each side integrated into an alliance system and incapable of independent action, without independent control of nuclear weapons (although US control of nuclear weapons in Germany was only nominal). (Trachtenberg; Reifer).

He seemed to believe that “stepping on the Western corns” in Berlin by threatening, in effect, to blockade it, would open the allies to a settlement that would recognize East Germany (and its borders) and keep West Germany from having independent nuclear weapons: though just how that was to be promoted by threatening West Berlin, rather than having the opposite effect, is not clear to me.

The US had “legal rights” to have troops in Berlin; and the Soviets had legal right, given concurrence by Cuba (fearing US illegal intervention) to have troops and missiles in Cuba.

Otherwise, each was an “abnormal” situation: an island allied to one superpower, in an ideologically and militarily hostile sea controlled by the other. Locally, for each, “right” was in contradiction to conventional “might.” The counterweight—maintaining “rights” in the face of locally-overwhelming conventional might—was the threat of escalation to all-out nuclear war, in the case of NATO and Berlin.

Khrushchev attempted to create the same “deterrent-defense” for his ally. Had he been successful, he might well have used his audacious success to achieve his aims for Berlin (though that’s not clear; and how that might have come out is not clear either). He was thrown back; but Castro is still there. (Was there ever again contingency planning for invasion of Cuba at the same pitch as in the fall of 1962?)

Here is the Chris Jones thesis¹ on Soviet policy toward Germany.

They were understandably obsessed with the threat of Germany toward the Soviet Union. Its occupation of East Europe was largely intended as a buffer against Germany (though also, as Stalin saw it, it was “natural” for each wartime ally to impose “its system” on the territory it conquered).

Both sides (both the superpowers and their European allies) were content to see Germany divided (though that was not the initial plan): it was less of a threat to its neighbors that way, either militarily or economically. All the better that each half should be under the thumb of a superpower, and entangled in an alliance, unable to act independently militarily. And neither wanted to see either part with an independent nuclear capability.

The SU (and probably France, and others) would have preferred to see Germany remain unarmed, not rearmed. (Stalin, in 1952, proposed to unify Germany, on condition that it be neutral and remain unarmed: whether sincerely or not). This the US opposed. The declared reason was that a rearmed Germany was necessary to a Western system of defense (first EDC, then NATO) to defend West Europe against a militarily superior Soviet Union (later, the Warsaw Pact). (Trachtenberg seems to take this as the sole motive).

But Jerry Sanders emphasizes an economic motive. To complete German and West European recovery and reconstruction after WWII, when Marshall Plan funds ran out, it was necessary to provide dollars to Europe and specifically West Germany. A still “isolationist” Congress in 1950 was not about to provide further loans or grants to Europe, especially Germany, for any purpose other than defense against a common enemy.

Tom Reifer conjectures that “if Nitze and Acheson could have provided dollars to Germany on any other basis, they would have been glad to do so.” (I.e., an extended Marshall Plan). But as it was, “defense spending”—made possible politically especially by the shock of the Chinese entry into the Korean War—was the only way to assure European recovery. (This subsidized industry in the US as well, with German and European purchases from the US).

With entry of Germany into NATO in 1954, the Soviets immediately organized the Warsaw Pact. But even before that, in 1953, the workers’ uprising of June 17 had demonstrated the unpopularity of the Soviet-dominated system and regime in East Germany, whose legitimacy (and borders) were not accepted by the West, either. There was a real prospect of the DDR being overthrown from within: and inevitably,

¹ See Christopher D. Jones, “Soviet Military doctrine as strategic deception: An offensive military strategy for defense of the socialist fatherland,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 16:3, 24-65, Sept. 2003; and Christopher Jones, “Protection from One’s Friends,” ...

a concern that West Berliners, and West German armed forces, might support further uprisings. This had to be deterred. A successful regime change in East Germany would encourage uprisings in other East European countries. And those as well might tempt West Germany, and the US and NATO to intervene in support.

THAT prospect was the real threat to the SU from NATO. (Indeed, the CPSU itself might not survive a general overthrow of Communist regimes in East Europe: each one of which, the Soviets realized, was maintained mainly by the threat of repression by the Soviet Army, as in East Berlin 1953: and later in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia.

In fact, this fear was realized eventually: the CPSU, and the Soviet Union itself, did *not* survive the withdrawal by Gorbachev of the Soviet “promise” to support Communist regimes militarily and the subsequent loss of power by those European Communist parties. The Soviet fear that the loss of East Germany, or another such state, would be, in the words of Marshal Akhromeev, the “detonator” to their whole system in Europe and even at home—what Eisenhower called a “domino” effect, which the US feared among its own client-states—was not paranoid or unrealistic, given the unpopularity of each of those regimes.

The Warsaw Pact, in other words, was not really addressed, as it claimed publicly, to the danger of an aggressive invasion by NATO, but to two other needs: repression by the Soviet Army (and whatever other allies it could call on) of an uprising in one of the member states of the Warsaw Pact; and deterrence of armed support of such an uprising—or temptation to encourage one—or intervention in it, by any of the NATO states, Germany in particular.

Germany was of special concern because of its unpopular divided status. The Soviets in 1953 feared that even the West Berliners themselves might join the riots in an attempt to unify Berlin (or the East Berliners might call for this). Later, the division of Germany remained a point of instability in the systems of both sides. The West—whose part of Germany had more freedom of action than the East—feared that the Soviets might at some point offer terms for reunification that “our” Germans could not resist, luring them out of NATO. The Soviets had reason to fear that another uprising in East Germany could bring in West German armed forces—who couldn’t bear to see their “brothers” subject to savage repression—even against US wishes. They feared, in particular, that if Germany got its own nuclear weapons (like France and England) it would be less dependent on the US and NATO for its own defense, more independent in its policies, and more free and determined to oppose Soviet repression of a popular revolt in East Germany.

Thus, Soviet strategy in East Europe, especially after 1959², was:

² (Jones doesn’t entirely explain why this originated at that date, three years after challenges in Poland and Hungary; there was, evidently, special unrest in East Germany in 1958-59, but why?)

- a) to train, equip and organize Soviet forces for fast offensive action *into states of East Europe, to put down revolts*;
- b) to deprive East European members of the Warsaw Pact of *defensive* organization, equipment, training, so as to leave open a “back door” to Soviet intervention;
- c) to rationalize the offensive orientation of both the Soviet and other forces by the *deception* that it was addressed to counter a threat from NATO, to prepare a counter-offensive to NATO aggression that would carry the fight to victory within NATO territory;
- d) to pretend, for morale purposes and to support the rationalization, that victory was both the goal and was feasible—despite the nuclear arming of NATO—on the basis of *an offensive use of tactical nuclear weapons* (despite the awareness at the Soviet staff level, and even higher though, in effect, subject to “denial,” that two-sided nuclear war, either tactical or strategic, would be catastrophically devastating).

Since only the Soviet forces, among Pact members, had such weapons, purportedly of critical importance, this rationalized the concentration of both planning and command among the Soviets, not their allied states: this further disabling them (along with thorough entanglement in Soviet-dominated “joint” ministries and agencies, and in Soviet-determined training and doctrine) from effective national armed *defense against Soviet intervention*.

There was thus some symmetry between US and SU purposes, concerns and strategy with respect to their alliances. Each claimed to fear aggression from the other alliance: largely pretense, so far as the superpower was concerned, and certainly exaggerated. The purpose of this pretense was to assure a degree of control (greater in the case of the SU, threatened by popular revolts) *over its allies and client states*.

In the case of the US, the concern was (after the initial purpose of German and European reconstruction, as a trading partner) to assure a strong US voice in European economic affairs and policy, and to prevent a German “turn to the East” (the “Rapallo” that Khrushchev foresaw as inevitable) to pursue trade with and energy from Russia in competition with or preference to economic dependence on the US: or dominating European economies, possibly shutting out the US. (And the US, scarcely less than the SU, didn’t want an independent West Germany starting a war in support of East European independence or unification of Germany, either.)

A nuclear doctrine for NATO, with West Germany deprived of independent control of nuclear weapons (although by the late Fifties, German fighter-bombers from the US were equipped with nuclear weapons only nominally controlled by Americans), thus served to rationalize American dominance in NATO planning and command, just as it did for the Soviets. In both cases, there had to be a state of “denial” about the suicidal aspects of this strategy: but denial was attainable by nearly all the humans in the respective apparatuses and societies.

In reality, it was in each case a terrorist threat of mutual destruction: but credible because of the low-level presence of weapons that the troops that might be under attack had been trained to regard as “defensive” and might not be stoppable by higher command from launching. Each backed this up by strategic forces whose use in combat would be even more omnicidal, globally.

In neither case did the highest officials feel forced to adopt this strategy of mutual destruction *triggered by tactical nuclear weapons* by a compelling, desperate need to stave off otherwise-imminent or likely aggression. Both had other purposes served by this posture, essentially of maintaining a status quo of hegemony *within their own respective spheres*. Such purposes had to be concealed, since few in their own publics or in the world who didn’t share their positions of power would have seen the danger to humanity justified—or even “understandable,” or tolerable—just to maintain those domestic and external status and power relationships.

But the concealment and deception was effective, enough to make the construction of two costly Doomsday Machines tolerated not only by their own societies but by the rest of the nations of the world, all of whom were, to the last man, woman and child, hostages to accidents, false alarms or the possible escalation of conflicts between the superpowers. And who remain so to this day.

The US, with its initial strategic superiority and its much wider (though less formal) sphere of hegemony, also had the desire to maintain that status quo by using US armed force, when necessary, to repress uprisings in that farflung sphere, beyond Europe. Like the Soviets in Europe (its neighbors) the US hoped to maintain a trading and investment sphere right up to the borders of the “Sino-Soviet Bloc” (in the US case, very far from its own neighborhood). There—in Iran, South Korea, Indochina, Taiwan and the Offshore Islands—a nuclear first-use policy (legitimized by being “essential” in Europe) could deter the SU or China from encouraging or intervening in support of an “uprising” against the US-favoring regime and the US troops present there with locally overwhelming conventional force.

In both South Korea, South Vietnam, and Taiwan, the danger of an irrepressible challenge to the status quo came from the other part of a divided nation, which was an ally of the other nuclear superpower (just as in the case of Berlin and the two Germanys). US nuclear first-use might be necessary to maintain its favored regime against intervention by “the other half.” But to make that first-use threat credible, or to carry it out safely, the US had to have a basis for assurance that the Soviet Union

would not respond with a nuclear “second-use,” retaliating to the US initiation of nuclear attacks against its ally.

Hence the need for a US counterforce capability for disarming the Soviet Union—or for credibly believing that it could—by escalating to a preemptive attack on the SU if the SU responded to a US nuclear attack on one of its allies. But such an effective counterforce capability was a chimera, just like the prospect of “victory” in two-sided tactical nuclear warfare.

It was just credible enough—based on the real possibility of loss of control (or of self-control at the highest levels, in a wartime crisis)—both to have a deterrent effect on the other and to rationalize the hegemon’s desire to maintain effective political control within its own sphere: at the cost of a more or less continual and recurrently intense danger of a regional or global holocaust.

The danger to all was not, so far, realized, though it came close in the Cuban Missile Crisis (and perhaps in the Berlin confrontation a year earlier, some months after the Wall went up; it might have come close there again in 1962 or 1963 if the Cuban Crisis had ended differently).

But it came close because Khrushchev and Castro—facing a real danger of a loss by US invasion of a new part of the Soviet sphere (an island inside the US closest sphere, just as West Berlin was an “island” within the Soviet sphere)—attempted to deter that loss in exactly the same way that NATO deterred West German intervention in East Germany: a credible threat of regional nuclear “defense” that would trigger worldwide holocaust.

The credibility of the threat in both cases depended on the physical presence of nuclear weapons among the frontline troops vulnerable to being attacked: superpower troops in both cases, linked to the strategic forces in their distant homelands. In other words, on the uncertainty that the respective high commands could *keep* the tactical weapons (or in Cuba, the MRBMs: the tactical weapons being, unaccountably, kept secret) from being fired under attack: the possibility or likelihood of *limited control* by the superpowers. The threat, in short, of their loss of control of at least some of their nuclear weapons, once conflict erupted at the local level.

Though those military on each side who didn’t wish to be deterred discounted the possibility of a breakdown of discipline on the other side (or their own), high officials knew better, and could not ignore it. For the highest officials in this case—Kennedy and Khrushchev—that possibility was enough to deter them from actually attacking: under the conditions that they actually experienced (in which there was only one military casualty).

That would not necessarily have been true for others who might have been in their place. For example, Lyndon Johnson—who was already slated to be and who

actually *was* in Kennedy's place just two years later—during the crisis seemed to favor attacking even operational missiles (as the JCS definitely did). And even Kennedy and Khrushchev were not tested by their response to further loss of life among their own troops.

But that prospect of loss of control—which was hourly becoming more and more of a reality—did not deter either Kennedy or Khrushchev from prolonging the crisis by threatening and preparing more violent activities (and actually pursuing them, in the case of US antisubmarine warfare).